

# Digital Literary Stylistics (SIG-DLS)

Official Web page for the ADHO Special Interest Group  
(SIG) in Digital Literary Stylistics

## Doctors in lusophone literature

Posted on [24/07/2019](#) by [Diana Santos](#)

How often is a medical doctor cited in literary works written in Portuguese in the period 1840-1919? How much can this illuminate the importance of medicine in the society, and the socio-economical status and prestige of the doctor in particular?



This question lies at the intersection of two research communities or projects I am involved in: [ILLREP, the representation of illness and disability in literary and cultural texts](#), an interdisciplinary research group at the University of Oslo, and the [COST action “Distant reading for European literary history”](#), a large and exciting endeavour with more than 30 participating countries, aiming to investigate (among other things) the relationships, similarities and differences between different literatures, more specifically their novels. This January (2019), in a plenary session of the COST action, the analysis of the socio-professional profiles that can be found in the various literatures was elected as one of the research angles that should be addressed. Or, removing the jargon, are butchers, writers or soldiers, prominent in each or all literatures? Are duchesses, governesses and cooks equally present?

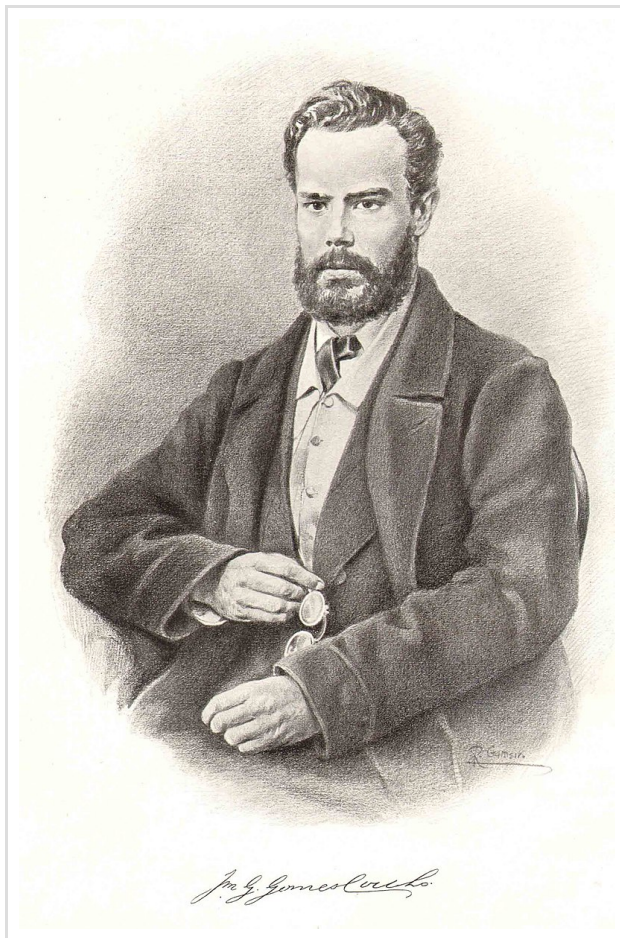
In this respect, a subquestion, the one I am concerned with here, is: and what about the health professions? How do doctors fare in fiction, compared for example to clergymen (of different persuasions)?

Having ca. 800 literary works in Portuguese in Literateca, in 6 different literary corpora spanning from 1380 to the present, richly syntactically and semantically annotated, there are a lot of questions we can pursue. For this particular issue, we restricted the corpus to novels originally written in Portuguese in the COST period (1840-1919), but

not to European origin only, since it is lusophone literature (i.e., works originally written in Portuguese) which concern us.

In addition to several other investigations in this subcorpus concerning health and illness, we looked at the lexemes “médico” and “facultativo” in some detail, and hope that this will provide an interesting point of comparison for other languages.

But first we should perhaps stress that Portuguese literature has many authors who are doctors. In fact this is something that is interesting per se, and may bring a special flavour to Portuguese literature. After all, it is conceivable, although by not means guaranteed, that this may bring more doctors and more medicine talk to the literature. In any case, this is probably not a conspicuous feature of the COST period, since this multitude of doctor writers is mainly true of the 20th century.



Anyway, one the most read and beloved works of the COST period, *As Pupilas do Senhor Reitor* (1867), written by a doctor (Júlio Dinis, see picture), has one doctor as its main character, and another doctor type which has become the stereotype/model of the country doctor, as a recent text in the [Portuguese Medical Journal](#) has highlighted.

So, what are the figures concerning doctors in the 172 novels in this period that we investigated? The first thing is that there is reference to a medical profession in 83% of them, more precisely in 143. And there are 18 novels where there are more than 30 mentions to doctors, which make us believe that they have a character with this profession. This means that 10% of the novels are (partially) about doctors.

Now, is this interesting? Is this different from the other literatures? Is this something that indicates either a particular concern with health or a period of scientific enlightenment in Portuguese-speaking belles-lettres? One needs of course to look into those novels in more detail, as well as to produce a specific classification of the kind of doctor involved (main character, secondary character, type, generic). Also, one should assess how relevant for the plot it is that a character is a doctor or not.

Let me give some examples of different cases, from a selection of those novels with a high proportion of references to the profession (4 out of the 18 which have more than 30 mentions).

In the already mentioned *Pupilas*, in addition to present a model of the country doctor, it is relevant for the plot that the main character has to go to the city to study, and come back to the village invested in a new status. However, and notwithstanding some of the funniest scenes of Portuguese literature in his encounters with the old-fashioned chemist and his wife and daughter, for the main plot I believe he could have studied law instead.

In the novel *O Dr. Luiz Sandoval*, by Alice Moderno (1892) it is just relevant for the plot that the first encounter between the main characters was motivated by his coming into her house as a doctor, but for all the rest of the story he could well have been a neighbour of whatever profession.

In the novel *A ermida de Castromino*, by Teixeira de Vasconcellos (1870), the main character is a doctor who has to become a trader due to money problems. However, some of the plot events are related to his profession, in that he becomes a sort of “resident doctor” of a particular family, and ends being a renowned friar canonized by the people due to the health suggestions he gives to those who come to see him. Finally, in *A caveira da mártir*, by Camilo Castelo Branco (1876), the medical doctor character is the evil one, but again all his deeds have little to do with his profession.

Now, is this similar in other literatures? From a very small pilot study we did with profession tagging in COST, and although “doctor” in most languages is ambiguous between medical doctor and simply university graduated, some form of “doctor” was one of the most common professions in six of the seven languages we probed from ca. 30,000 words from 10 books per language.

On the other hand, it is perhaps understandable that (medical) doctors are more common in contemporary than historical novels. The subgenre of the novel, and the literary school it pertains to, is obviously relevant. We have already been able to detect

a significant correlation between the health domain and the naturalist school. But this will have to become another post...

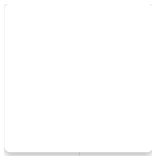
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### About Diana Santos

Having worked on NLP of Portuguese for the last 30 years, I have recently joined the distant reading community through the COST action "Distant Reading for European Literary History". I believe now I have been doing distant reading in corpus linguistics for a long time without realizing it.

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